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Elon Musk salute controversy

On January 20, 2025, while speaking at a rally celebrating U.S. president Donald Trump's second inauguration, businessman and political figure Elon Musk twice made a gesture interpreted by some as a Nazi or Roman salute.[a] On X (formerly Twitter), Musk dismissed the accusations of Nazi sympathies, derided them as being politicized,[2][3][4] and described them as a "tired" attack.[5][6] While the Anti-Defamation League defended Musk and argued that the gesture carried no significant meaning, other Jewish-rights organizations have condemned the gesture.[7]

Musk repeating the gesture before saying, "My heart goes out to you."[1]

Multiple European political parties demanded that Musk be banned from entering their countries. Neo-Nazi and white supremacist groups celebrated the salutes.[4]

Inauguration, speech, and gestures

On January 20, 2025, the second inauguration of Donald Trump took place after his victory in the 2024 United States presidential election. Many people were invited, including Elon Musk.[8] Musk was influential to Trump's campaign as the second-largest donor. Trump designated him to co-head the Department of Government Efficiency during Trump's presidency.[9][10]

After the inauguration, Musk attended a celebratory rally at the Capital One Arena in Washington, D.C., where he thanked the attendees for voting for Trump.[11] Musk jumped onto the stage, started throwing his hands in the air, and then began to dance.[12] After he finished dancing, Musk placed his hand to his heart and extended his arm out above his head with his palm facing down, making a straight-arm gesture. He then turned around and repeated the gesture to the audience behind him.[11][13] He then said, "My heart goes out to you. It is thanks to you that the future of civilization is assured" after he finished the gestures.[13] *My heart goes out to you* is a phrase typically used to show "sorrow or sympathy" for someone, rather than an expression of thanks.[14][15][16]

Reactions

United States

Anti-Musk sign at a protest in Salem, Oregon

The incident quickly sparked online comparisons to the Nazi salute.[11][17] While watching the rally, CNN anchor Erin Burnett said that the action was "striking".[11] Some commentators have attributed the gesture to Musk's self-diagnosis of Asperger's syndrome.[18][19] Musk, however, has never been medically diagnosed with autism or Asperger's syndrome.[20] Several autistic people and therapists interviewed by *Buzzfeed*, as well as autistic journalist James McNaney of the *Belfast Telegraph*, have objected to the notion that being on the autism spectrum would cause Musk to make this gesture.[21] [22]

In an article for *The New York Times*, Berlin bureau chief Katrin Bennhold wrote that "it looked a lot like the salute used in Germany and fascist Italy" but that "a striking number of different interpretations began to circulate", also drawing comparisons to the Bellamy salute.[6] Scott Jennings, an American political strategist and CNN contributor, condemned critics who accused Musk of doing a Nazi salute. He stated that Musk's critics are "suffering from progression of Trump Derangement Syndrome". He also referred to the controversy as a conspiracy theory.[23][24]

The Anti-Defamation League came to Musk's defense, stating in an X post: "It seems that Elon Musk made an awkward gesture in a moment of enthusiasm, not a Nazi salute."[25] However, former ADL national director Abraham Foxman described the gesture as a "Heil Hitler Nazi salute".[26] Aaron Astor, a history professor at Tennessee's Maryville College, defended the ADL's stance on X, stating that it was "not a Nazi salute".[27][28] Southern Poverty Law Center, a nonprofit organization specializing in civil rights, referred to it as an "apparent Nazi salute" and noted it had "ignited a firestorm of controversy".[29] Several academics with expertise on extremism have agreed to describing the gesture as a Nazi salute.[27][30] The Lemkin Institute for Genocide Prevention responded to the "Nazi salute" by issuing a red flag alert for genocide in the United States.[31]

Jerry Nadler, a Jewish Democratic congressman from Manhattan, called the gesture antisemitic.[32] Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, a progressive Democratic congresswoman, condemned Musk's gestures and accused him of Nazism.[33][34] Republican Congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene defended Musk, accusing news outlets of lying about him and spreading "propaganda to serve the Democrat party".[35] Republican representative Elise Stefanik, Trump's nominee to serve as ambassador to the United Nations, defended Musk at her confirmation hearing.[36][37][38]

On the late-night sketch comedy show *Saturday Night Live*, cast members James Austin Johnson (as Trump) and Michael Che lampooned the moment in the show's cold open and *Weekend Update* segment.[39][40][41]

International

Benjamin Netanyahu, the prime minister of Israel, defended Musk on X, stating that Musk "is being falsely smeared", and calling him "a great friend of Israel".[42][43] Following Musk's speech, Andrea Stroppa, Musk's representative in Italy, posted the image of him on X along with the caption, "Roman Empire is back, starting with the Roman salute." Later, he removed the post, stating that Musk "is autistic" and that he was just expressing his feelings without emulating fascism.[4] An Italian communist youth organization, Cambiare Rotta, hung a doll of Musk upside down in Piazzale Loreto, a square in Milan where Mussolini's body was hung upside down by partisans after he was executed during the final days of World War II.[4] Italian journalist Roberto Saviano attacked Elon Musk in a Facebook post, stating, "The end of all this will be violent. His fall will be equal to that of those to whom it historically refers with this gesture. Musk will fall at the hands of those he now incites fueled by the same violence he practices."[44]

The German party The Left called for Musk to be banned from entering Germany, citing both the gestures and Musk's past support for Germany's far-right AfD party and his continued interference in European politics.[45] Austria's Green Party also called for a similar ban.[46] Austrian green politician Lukas Hammer called both Interior and Foreign Ministries to consider the possibility of denying Musk's entry.[47] When asked about the incident, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz stated that Europe will not accept support for extreme-right positions. Musk reacted to the remarks on X by mocking Scholz.[48][49]

British anti-Brexit activist group, Led By Donkeys, projected an image of Musk's gesture onto the Tesla Gigafactory in the city of Berlin with the phrase "Heil Tesla",[50][51] and used it in a YouTube video about Musk's political views.[52] Later, the German law enforcement launched an investigation into the image projected by the group, stating that it may have breached German laws on the use of symbols linked to illegal organizations.[53]

Yolanda Díaz, the Spanish minister of labor and longtime member of the Communist Party of Spain, announced that she would quit using X in response to the gesture. She also accused Musk of turning X into a "propaganda mechanism".[44][54] Alexander Lukashenko, president of Belarus, condemned Musk, stating, "They cannot say anything to justify it. This is an open Nazi salute, the Americans and Mr. Musk have simply taken this too far." Lukashenko also stated, "Why do you go on stage and do the Hitler salute in front of millions of people? Are you doing anyone good? We, together with the Americans, fought against it. It's just nuts."[55] Argentina's President Javier Milei defended Musk at the World Economic Forum's meeting in the city of Davos, Milei stated that his "dear friend Musk" has been "unfairly vilified by 'wokeism' in recent hours for an innocent gesture that only means his gratitude to the people". He also said "forums like this one have been protagonists and promoters of the sinister agenda of 'wokeism' that is doing so much harm to the West", referring to the World Economic Form in Davos.[56][57]

Jewish groups and Holocaust survivors

Amy Spitalnick, the CEO of Jewish Council for Public Affairs, argued that Musk's actions could give extremists "license" to act on their violent ideologies because he is a prominent public figure. She asserts that the salute is not a trivial or ambiguous gesture but part of a troubling pattern in Musk's public behavior. For example, Musk previously endorsed a post on his platform, X, in November 2023, claiming that Jewish people promote "hatred against whites" and support immigration by "hordes of minorities". This, along with his support for the German far-right party Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), has raised

concerns for Spitalnick about Musk's role in normalizing antisemitic and extremist views. She argued that Musk's behavior, including the salute, should be viewed as part of a broader effort to normalize fascist symbols and ideologies, which in turn makes marginalized communities, particularly Jews, less safe.[58]

A placard in Melbourne, Australia, compares Musk's gesture to Hitler's.

Michel Friedman, a German-French publicist and former deputy chair of the Central Council of Jews in Germany, described Musk's gestures as a "disgrace" and said Musk had shown that a "dangerous point for the entire free world" had been reached.[49] In Canada, Holocaust survivor David Moskovic stated he was alarmed by Musk's salute.[59] A coalition of Jewish organizations in the US and Canada announced that they would be leaving X in response to the incident.[60]

On January 20, 2025, ahead of International Holocaust Remembrance Day, Musk addressed attendees at an AfD rally, where he stated that there is "too much focus on past guilt", suggesting that children should not be held accountable for their ancestors' actions. According to *The New York Times*, Musk's comments were "an apparent effort to wipe away the long shadow of the Nazis that has influenced generations of Germans to quarantine extreme political parties from public life".[61]

Neo-Nazi and white nationalist figures and movements

Numerous neo-Nazi and white nationalist figures and movements expressed support for Musk's gestures. Christopher Pohlhaus, leader of the neo-Nazi group Blood Tribe, posted on Telegram, "I don't care if this was a mistake. I'm going to enjoy the tears over it." Andrew Torba, founder of the far-right social media platform Gab, said, "Incredible things are happening already lmao."[62][63]

A Proud Boys chapter posted a clip of Musk's video to its Telegram channel with the text, "Hail Trump!"[64] White supremacist movement White Lives Matter also reacted to Musk's gestures in Telegram with the message, "Thanks for (sometimes) hearing us, Elon. The White Flame will rise again!"[65] Thomas Sewell, an Australian neo-Nazi posted a video of Musks' gestures describing it as a "Donald Trump White Power moment".[66] Nick Fuentes, founder of the white nationalist group the Groypers, described the gesture as "straight up like 'Sieg Heil', like loving Hitler energy".[67]

In the month after the incident, rapper Kanye West made a series of controversial Twitter posts that contained several antisemitic and pro-Nazi comments,[68] among which was an uploaded image of Musk's gesture captioned "heil Elon" in all capitals.[69] Another of the posts stated West's belief that "Elon stole [West's] Nazi swag at the inauguration".[70]

Social media reactions

Many users on X, the social media platform which Musk owns, criticized the gesture, saying it resembled a Nazi salute.[71] Several people on X posted images of Barack Obama, Kamala Harris, Hillary Clinton and Elizabeth Warren each with an arm extended outwards, likening it to Musk's gesture, with a post by Libs of TikTok receiving over 100 million views. However, these screenshots had the context behind the gestures removed and *Newsweek* has called these images "misleading".[72]

In response to Musk's gestures, many major subreddits on Reddit instituted new rules banning links to or screenshots of X posts.[2][73] Sam Kuffel, a meteorologist at CBS 58 in Milwaukee, was fired after she criticized the gesture in two Instagram posts.[74]

Musk family

Musk's estranged daughter Vivian Wilson spoke out about Musk's gesture, stating, "I'm just gonna say let's call a spade a fucking spade" on Instagram's Threads platform on January 21.[75] Elon Musk's father, Errol, and sister, Tosca, defended Musk. Errol called the accusations against Elon "absolute nonsense" and "rubbish".[76][77]

Musk's reaction to criticism

Elon Musk responded to criticism of his alleged salute on January 21 on his X account, including calling all news outlets criticizing him biased. He wrote that "The legacy media is pure propaganda", that "they need better dirty tricks", and that "the 'everyone is Hitler' attack is sooo tired".[5][78] After the gestures were described as a "Nazi salute" on his Wikipedia page, Musk reiterated his previous criticism against the website, calling for its "defunding".[79][80][81][82]

On January 23, three days after the incident, Musk made a series of Nazi-themed puns on social media as a reaction to the controversy, which the Anti-Defamation League (after previously defending his behavior) called "offensive" and "inappropriate".[83] The U.S. newspaper *The Hill* said he used the puns "to taunt those who accused him of making a fascist salute".[83]

On January 29, Musk said that he would sue Tim Walz, governor of Minnesota, for accusing him of doing Nazi salutes.[84] He also said that he plans on suing media outlets that call the gesture a Nazi salute.[85] According to Musk's lawyers, they are ready to file a defamation lawsuit, seeking compensation for what they claim to be a misleading and harmful statement.[86]

Copycat incidents

British political commentator Calvin Robinson gave a speech at the National Pro-Life Summit in Washington, D.C., which concluded with a gesture that was described as a "pro-Nazi salute" in a statement released the same day by the Anglican Catholic Church. The alleged Nazi salute was seen as an imitation of Musk's actions by commentators. The church announced that Robinson's license in his church had been revoked and was no longer a priest of the ACC,[87][88] and the entire editorial team at his gaming news website, God is a Geek, resigned in protest.[89]

Laura Smith, the Towamencin Township supervisor in Pennsylvania, resigned after posting a TikTok video of her appearing to replicate Musk's gesture. She later deleted the video.[90]

Real estate agent Yessica Garza of San Antonio made a social media video in which she imitated Musk's salute and said, "My heart goes out to you." Her employer, RD Realty Group, subsequently fired her and referred to her as having made "an offensive gesture".[91]

See also

- Political activities of Elon Musk
- Views of Elon Musk § Race and white nationalism

Notes

a. The "Roman salute" is a gesture which was used by Italian Fascists, then adopted by the Nazis. It is not believed to have been used by ancient Romans.

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